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Critical Disability Studies

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Critical Disability Studies as Methodology

Sami Schalk

ABSTRACT Response to Julie Avril Minich, "Enabling Whom? Critical Disability Studies Now," published in *Lateral* 5.1. Schalk calls for a shift in thinking that directly affects action and discusses creating classroom experiences that help students to critique intersecting social structures in their everyday encounters.

Reading Julie Avril Minich's "Enabling Whom?: Critical Disability Studies Now," I nearly applauded when she argued that critical disability studies is a methodology rather than a subject-oriented area of study. She writes: "The methodology of disability studies as I would define it, then, involves scrutinizing not bodily or mental impairments but the social norms that define particular attributes as impairments, as well as the social conditions that concentrate stigmatized attributes in particular populations."¹ This argument is essential to the future vitality of the field—one that has been gestured toward and even enacted by multiple scholars, but not to my knowledge articulated in this particular way. Following Minich, we can understand critical disability studies as a method, an approach, a theoretical framework and perspective—not (exclusively) a study of disabled people. One can study disabled people and not be doing critical disability studies and one can be doing critical disability studies and not be directly studying disabled people.

In some sense Minich's argument runs parallel to work in crip theory, a strain of disability studies theory that draws upon insights in queer theory. Robert McRuer proposes that crip theory "should be understood as having a similar contestatory relationship to disability studies and identity that queer theory has to LGBT studies and identity, [but] crip theory does not—perhaps paradoxically—seek to dematerialize disability identity."² More recently Alison Kafer has argued that crip theory allows for the inclusion of "those who lack a 'proper' (read: medically acceptable, doctor-provided, and insurer-approved) diagnosis for their symptoms" and "people identifying with disability and lacking not only a diagnosis but any 'symptoms' of impairment."³ Scholarship in crip theory expands the possibilities of analysis in disability studies by moving away from more strictly medical, legal, and identity-based definitions of disability as an object of analysis. Minich's argument pushes this crip theory stance further by proposing a critical disability studies that is not dependent upon defining an object of analysis (no matter how expansive the definition), but rather focuses on the method of analysis instead.

In my own work I use the term *(dis)ability* to designate the socially constructed system of norms which categorizes and values bodyminds⁴ based on concepts of ability⁵ and disability. Other scholars have used terms like *dis/ability* or *ability/disability* system to refer to similar ideas.⁶ I believe that one of the ways that critical disability studies can develop itself more clearly as a methodology is by using critical terms that work in parallel with terms in related identity / oppression / social justice fields. Race, gender, class, and








sexuality are all overarching terms that designate both marginalized (people of color, women and transgender people, working class people, queer people) and privileged positions (white people, men, wealthy people, straight people). By designating *(dis)ability* as a system of social norms which categorizes, ranks, and values bodyminds and *disability* as a historically and culturally variable category within this larger system, critical disability studies can better engage in conversations about the ways both ability and disability operate in representations, language, medicine, the law, history, and other cultural arenas. I use the parenthetical designation of (dis)ability because it gestures toward the mutually dependent nature of disability and ability. As bell hooks argues, the margins define the center.⁷ That is, the marginalized space of disability exists around, and helps define the limits of, the centered, privileged space of ability. Further, for me, the curve of the parenthesis, rather than the back slash of dis/ability or disability/ability, also visually suggests the mutable nature of these terms. Rather than the hard, distinct line of the back slash, the parenthetical curve helps highlight how the boundaries between disability and ability are uneven, contestable, and context dependent. (Dis)ability as a term can aid in understanding critical disability studies as a methodological approach to studying power, privilege, and oppression of bodily and mental norms which is not dependent upon the presence of disabled people, yet is informed by social perspectives, practices, and concerns about disability.

Minich emphasizes that a critical disability studies methodology must engage issues of race and (dis)ability, including in areas not explicitly marked by disability. The distinction between *(dis)ability* and *disability* matter in terms of improving and increasing engagement with race in critical disability studies and vice versa. Consider, for example, how disability, in terms of claims of lesser intellectual abilities, was used to justify the enslavement of black people,⁸ while at the same time an understanding of black people's bodies as hyper strong and impervious to heat and pain also justified conditions of slave labor. This racial double bind, to borrow from Marilyn Frye, positioned black people as at once disabled and hyper able and yet suited for slavery in both cases.⁹ To engage these two disparate historical understandings of the black body, to parse the ways in which both disability and ability were used discursively to justify violence and oppression, we must discuss (dis)ability in relation to race within the specific historical and cultural context of the antebellum United States; and we must do so without anachronistically projecting current definitions of disability onto the past.¹⁰ Critical disability studies as a methodology, therefore, can assess how (dis)ability as a social system worked in concert with systems of race during this period in a way that impacted all black people, both disabled and nondisabled. These historical insights can also help us understand how race and (dis)ability continue to be mutually constitutive in our contemporary moment. Furthermore, as Minich's list of subjects that scholars have not yet recognized as critical disability studies suggests, understanding critical disability studies as a methodology also means exploring issues of illness, health, and disease which often have important intersections with issues of race and class. Using (dis)ability as a term for a system of power that shapes bodymind norms and expectations allows for the inclusion of illness and disease no matter what the current definitions of disability might be.

To close, like Minich, I'd like to discuss how her argument impacts pedagogy in addition to research. Teaching critical disability studies as a methodology can be a way of shifting our students' perspectives on the world. I teach a lot of first person narratives and films that feature disabled people because many of my students have had limited contact with people with disabilities. It is important for me to expose them to art, culture, and representations created by disabled people. However, I emphasize to my students that my courses are not just about increasing student knowledge *about* disabled people, but also about changing the way students operate in their lives beyond the classroom, shifting the

way they think, behave, and interpret the world around them. Incorporating a critical disability studies methodology into my teaching, therefore, means helping students understand (dis)ability as a social system that impacts all of us in a wide variety of systemic and quotidian ways. I tell my students that if they find themselves checking to see if a building is accessible or correcting their friends who use “crazy” as an insult or questioning their own emotional reactions to inspirational stories of disabled people, then I have done my job. If they are reflective of their own desire for able-bodiedness or hyper-ability, if they begin to accept multiple ways of moving, thinking, communicating and being in the world, if they even begin to claim a disability identity for themselves, then I have done my job. If my students are thinking critically about issues of (dis)ability outside of class, then I have provided them with not just knowledge or facts, but a critical perspective, an approach to interpreting the world. I have given them some of the initial tools for using a critical disability studies methodology in their day to day lives. When these students go on to become social workers, doctors, lawyers, teachers, web developers, and more, they retain this critical disability studies perspective which impacts the way they do their jobs well after my course is over. This for me is one concrete way that critical disability studies can retain its investment in social justice and have an impact within the larger world, despite the real limitations of the academy that Minich elucidates regarding accommodations and disabled people in higher education. This pedagogical focus on critical thinking skills and on an altered perspective on the world is just one of the many possibilities that I find exciting and important about Minich’s argument for a critical disability studies methodology and its role in the future of critical humanities.

Notes

1. Julie Avril Minich, “Enabling Whom? Critical Disability Studies Now,” *Lateral* 5, no. 1 (2016), <http://csalateral.org/wp/issue/5-1/forum-alt-humanities-critical-disability-studies-now-minich/>. 
2. Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 35. 
3. Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 12, 13. 
4. I use the term bodymind after Margaret Price who defines it as “the imbrication (not just the combination) of the entities usually called ‘body’ and ‘mind.’” See “The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain,” *Hypatia* 30, no. 1 (2015): 270. 
5. In her 2009 book, Fiona Campbell proposes studies in ableism and ability. Campbell makes clear, however, that “A move toward studies in ableism must not spell a separation with disability studies, rather the focus on ableism is meant to reconfigure a disability studies perspective and extend it” (198). Minich’s argument for critical disability studies as a methodology provides an umbrella under which both disability studies as it has been most often practiced and Campbell’s proposed studies in ableism might comfortably fit alongside one another. See Fiona Kumari Campbell, *Contours of Ableism: The Production of Disability and Abledness* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). 
6. For example, Goodley uses dis/ability and Garland-Thomson uses ability/disability. See Dan Goodley, *Dis/Ability Studies: Theorising Disablism and Ableism*, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2014); Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, “Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory,” in *Feminisms Redux: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. Robyn Warhol-Down and Diane Price Herndl (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 487–513. 
7. bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2000). 

8. Douglas Baynton, "Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History," in *The New Disability History: American Perspectives*, ed. Paul Longmore and Lauri Umansky (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 34–41. [↗](#)
9. Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*, The Crossing Press Feminist Series (Trumansburg, N.Y.: Crossing Press, 1983), 3. [↗](#)
10. See Dea H. Boster, *African American Slavery and Disability: Bodies, Property, and Power in the Antebellum South, 1800–1860* (New York: Routledge, 2013). [↗](#)

[Bio](#)



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